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SUPPORTING COLOMBIA, AMERICA'S BEST FRIEND IN LATIN AMERICA

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. WELLER) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. WELLER of Illinois. Madam Speaker, I rise to express concern about an action taken by the majority of this House this past week.

When the question is often asked, who is America's best friend in Latin America, no matter where you are in Latin America, they always say the democratically-elected government of Colombia is America's best friend.

This last week, the House of Representatives voted to turn its back on America's best friend. At a time when the autocrats threaten democracy, when democracy is at risk in Latin America by those who threaten it, such as the President of Venezuela, this Congress, this House, voted to turn its back on Latin America's oldest democracy, America's best friend in Latin America.

If you think about it, who else is Colombia? Colombia is also America's most reliable and strongest partner when it comes to addressing terrorism and addressing narcotics. Colombia has been there.

President Uribe, the President of Colombia, today is the most popular elected President in the entire hemisphere. This Congress has a 15 percent approval rating with the American people. Fifteen, 1-5 percent. President Uribe has 80 percent approval ratings with his own people. Why? Because he was elected to reduce violence. He was elected to bring security to his country, and today 73 percent of the Colombian people have said in a recent opinion poll that they feel more secure in Colombia. Seventy-two percent in that same poll said they believe President Uribe is making progress and at the same time protecting human rights. So President Uribe has made tremendous progress.

Today, violence has been reduced, kidnapping is down, murder rates are down. In fact, it is safer to walk the streets of Bogota, Colombia, or Medellin, once known as the most dangerous city in all the world, than it is to walk the streets of Washington, DC.

President Uribe with Plan Colombia and the support of his own people has made tremendous progress. They are reliable partners, reliable friends. And last week this House voted to turn its back on the democratically-elected government of Colombia. Think what message that sends to Latin America, about how the United States House of Representatives respects and treats our friends in Latin America.

We have before us a trade promotion agreement with Colombia. It is a good agreement. My friend and colleague from Ohio says it is all about oil. We don't need a trade agreement to buy oil

from Colombia. In fact, right now Colombian products, manufactured goods and farm products enter the United States duty free. There are no taxes on their imports. But U.S. products, such as construction equipment, the bulldozers that could be used in mining and various other economic projects in Colombia, face 15 percent tariffs. Our corn and soybeans and livestock products face tariffs of up to 40 percent, but Colombian agricultural products enter the United States duty free. We need a trade promotion agreement with Colombia to even the playing field.

We often hear from folks back home, you know, we need trade agreements that are fair and where we treat each other equally, so if they get access to our market, we get access to their's. Well, under the status quo, they have that. We need this agreement so we get access to their market.

Some say Colombia is not very important. Well, there are 42 million people there. It is the second largest Spanish-speaking Nation in the world. It is America's best friend. But we have a good agreement before us.

Some have said we need to oppose this agreement because there has been violence against union activists. The Uribe government has acknowledged that. In fact, they have done some incredible things. They have increased the budget for prosecution of violent acts by 72 percent. They have added almost 2,200 prosecutors and lawyers and others for the Prosecutor General to go after those who commit violent crimes.

When it comes specifically to labor leaders in Colombia, as the Washington Post has pointed out, the murder rate for labor leaders in Colombia is actually lower than the national murder rate, and any murder is unacceptable, whether it is here in Washington, DC or Bogota.

The bottom line is, Colombia is our friend. This House voted to turn its back on our best friend. We need to move forward on the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement. We should bring that forward and give our best friend in Latin America what they deserve. They have earned it.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Indiana (Mr. BURTON) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. BURTON of Indiana addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from North Carolina (Mr. WATT) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. WATT addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

PRESIDENT SHOULD SIGN SCHIP BILL TO HELP WORKING AMERICANS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Connecticut (Mr. COURTNEY) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. COURTNEY. Madam Speaker, I rise in the well today to talk about an event that occurred last weekend on Saturday in Tolland, Connecticut, which is a suburban town about 20 miles east of Hartford.

The Connecticut State Dental Society held an open free clinic under a program called Mission of Mercy, which is a group of dentists around the country that organize operatories and equipment to go into communities and basically open the doors and say anybody who needs dental care, come and we will take care of you. The advertising for this event in Connecticut was modest. There were some TV public service announcements, there were some small notices in the press.

The Dental Society had organized about 180 dentists, a number of hygienists and staff to be with the group that morning. Much to their amazement, people started lining up for this event at 6 o'clock the prior evening, Friday evening, and by 4 o'clock in the morning, when the dentists actually arrived to start setting up the operation, there were already 350 people waiting in line to get their care. By 5 o'clock in the morning, the crowd had grown to the point where the Connecticut State Police had to come out and actually turn people away.

At about 5:30 in the morning, the heavens opened up. There was thunder, lightning, and it rained, it was pouring rain, hard rain on the crowd, and none would leave, because they were terrified of losing their place in line and being deprived of the opportunity to get an extraction, to get a filling, to get their teeth cleaned, because they were so desperate to get dental care. Looking at the pictures in the press the following day of people literally huddled in the rain waiting to try and get an opportunity to get their teeth taken care of, it really made you wonder what country are we living in.

Tolland, Connecticut, where this is being held, is suburban Connecticut. This is not a distressed area. This is not an urban area with large pockets of chronic poverty. It is a suburban area with working families and working individuals who definitely earn a paycheck and provide a standard of living that would be described as middle class for themselves and their families. But when I joined the dental clinic later in the day around 1 o'clock in the afternoon, 800 people were at that point lined up to be served. They had turned away hundreds of others. People were waiting in the stands of a gymnasium, waiting for an opportunity to get their teeth taken care of.

Now, why am I talking about this on the floor of the United States Congress? The reason is because there is